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DESIGN FOR COTTON STOCKINGS

A radio conversation between Miss Ruth Van Deman and Miss Ruth O'Brien, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Forney Rankin, Office of Information, broadcast Thursday, March 16, 1939, in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home program, by the National Broadcasting Company and a network of 93 associate radio stations.

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FORNEY RANKIN:

There's an old saying among newspapermen that when a dog bites a man, that's not news. But when a man bites a dog -- well, that is news---front page news. And that's the way I feel about the report that Ruth Van Deman and Miss O'Brien of the Bureau of Home Economics are bringing us today on cotton hosiery for women. Miss O'Brien, as many of you know, is in charge of the textile and clothing research of the Bureau. I don't want to pose as an expert here in such matters, but, frankly, I can't see where there's any news value in plain old-fashioned cotton stockings. But, when the Congress asks the Bureau of Home Economics of the Department of Agriculture to see what can be done to develop smoother, smarter women's hosiery from our fine American-grown cotton---well, that's something quite different. That is news.

But, Miss Van Deman, I didn't mean to steal any headlines from you and Miss O'Brien - - -

RUTH VAN DEMAN:

Not at all. You're getting us off to a fine start. And wait just a minute, Mr. Rankin. I thought I caught just a hint of skepticism in your voice when you said smoother, smarter cotton hosiery - - -

RANKIN:

I wasn't conscious of it.

VAN DEMAN:

I want you to see these samples Miss O'Brien has.

RUTH O'BRIEN:

These were designed by our hosiery expert to show what can be done in women full-fashioned cotton hose. Many cotton hose are circular knit. And that accounts partly anyway, for the lack of fit around the ankle - - -

VAN DEMAN:

And in the foot, too, I find.

O'BRIEN:

Yes, full-fashioned hose fit better in every respect.

RANKIN:

These do seem to have quite a luster. Is that some special finish?

O'BRIEN:

No, that's due just to the mercerizing. You know that's an alkali treatment that's been used for years to make cotton yarns stronger and more lustrous. All these hose are made of long-staple cotton, combed, and the yarns mercerized and gassed.

RANKIN:

Gassed? What do you mean?

O'BRIEN:

Yes, after the mercerizing the yarns were passed by a gas flame that singed off the fuzzy ends of the cotton fibers---another common process in making fine cotton yarns.

RANKIN:

Sounds like singeing a chicken.

O'BRIEN:

Very much that idea. The mercerizing and the gassing gave these yarns their luster and smoothness. And we choose the weight of these yarns very carefully. The yarn count in these hose runs from 60 to 120. The count, as perhaps you know, is the number of hanks of yarn to the pound.

RANKIN:

Yes, I've been around some of the hosiery mills in my own state of North Carolina.

O'BRIEN:

Of course you know then. And you can appreciate what the manufacturing problems are in these different weights and designs. You notice we have all kinds here---some plain knit in service weight---some more sheer---some in fancy mesh designs - - -

RANKIN:

Even lace toes. What d'ye know about that !

O'BRIEN:

Oh my, yes. We've tried to get styles to please everybody---everything from service weight to cobwebs. The mesh toes are to go with the open-toe sandals so popular right now. I wouldn't exactly choose them for myself, but - - -

RANKIN:

Oh! I see, when you do research, you have to be broadminded.

O'BRIEN:

That's it. And there seems to be a call for the fancy-mesh styles to go with summer sports clothes.

RANKIN:

Especially by the people who stand on the side lines and watch.

O'BRIEN:

I wish it were only that. But that's one of the contradictory things about women and hosiery. So often when they buy a cobweb they expect it to wear like cast iron. And when holes come, they blame the stocking rather than the wrong use they gave it.

VAN DEMAN:

Some of these mesh ones could stand a few more reinforcements.

O'BRIEN:

Yes, that's one of the problems we're working on now. Any stocking that's to give good wear must have properly placed reinforcements. Of course, unfortunately some of us have more prominent joints than others. And we don't all walk alike, or wear the same kind of shoes. All those things make a difference in where the rub comes on our hose.

RANKIN:

Miss O'Brien, do you think these cottons will wear better than silk?

O'BRIEN:

I'm not prepared to say on that. As you know, we're running stretch tests, and rub tests, and various other laboratory tests on these cotton hose.

RANKIN:

Yes, Miss Van Deman took me through your laboratory the other day.

O'BRIEN:

Later on, we hope to run similar tests on silk and other fibers. But of course it is hard to compare hose of different fibers, each has its own special points.

For instance, a well-knit, high-quality silk stocking is wonderfully elastic. There's no question about that. It will not only stretch easily, but it will recover its original shape rapidly. Some of that depends on the amount of twist in the yarn and various things in the knitting. There's a special stitch used in the top of some stockings, the welt as the hosiery people call it, to give two-way stretch. You'll notice we've tried that in some of these cotton hose. And we're going to try cotton yarns with rubber in them to make an even more stretchable top.

Another thing we're very much interested in is the back seam. If you'll look at these hose you'll see they're very closely stitched. They're sewed together well. They won't rip easily. That takes more thread and it takes more labor than it does to make the poor seams you see so often on cheap hosiery.

RANKIN:

That would be just as true of silk as of cotton, wouldn't it?

O'BRIEN:

Just as true, yes. But it's one of the points that people often overlook in the price of hosiery. All those details of careful manufacture cost money. The same thing is true of the quality of dye used. We're recommending here good dyes, applied so the color will be permanent.

VAN DEMAN:

I like these beige shades. They'll look well with summer clothes.

O'BRIEN:

I like some of these grays. But that's all a matter of personal taste.

RANKIN:

Well, Miss O'Brien, I refuse to express my tastes as to women's hose. But--as a husband--I would like to ask a pertinent question. When are these cotton hose going to be put on the market and how much are they going to sell for?

O'BRIEN:

Those are two questions I can't answer, at least not yet. We hope some manufacturers will take up these designs and put them on the market this summer. And we hope some of these plain-knit styles can be manufactured to sell for 2 pairs or maybe 3 pairs, for a dollar.

VAN DEMAN:

Don't you think manufacturers would be more likely to go ahead if they knew how much women want good quality cotton hose in the moderate price range?

O'BRIEN:

I think it would help a lot.

VAN DEMAN:

Would you mind then if I asked our listeners to write us if they're interested?

O'BRIEN:

No. We'd be very glad to have them. Only I can't promise anything.

VAN DEMAN:

Except that we'll let them know later if these cotton hose are manufactured on a commercial scale. And, Mr. Rankin, I think that's all our progress report for today.

RANKIN:

Thank you, Ruth Van Deman, and you Miss O'Brien. And I'll repeat that suggestion of yours, Miss Van Deman. Ladies, if you are interested in full fashioned cotton hose, such as Miss O'Brien has just described for us, write to Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A., Washington, D. C.

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